

GOETHE MEDAL 2019

LAUDATOR SPEECH FOR DOĞAN AKHANLI

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Weimar, 28 August 2019

- Check against delivery -

Doğan, Shirin Neshat, Enkhbat Rozoon, Mr Lehmann, members of the jury, ladies and gentlemen,

The way Goethe grasped time is no longer valid. That will not surprise you. When two hundred-seventy years pass by since the day of Goethe's birth, the idea of this passing and the question of its expression remain unaffected.

In his novels, plays and his cultural work, Doğan Akhanlı conveys an idea of what it means to affect time itself. But how do we affect time? By allowing individuals and entire groups fall out of it, letting them pivot in the time loops of bureaucracy, depriving them of the conceivability of a future and letting the past and them go mad with the question of whether what they've experienced and are experiencing is unfolding in their own time reckoning or in one from another reality. States do that, affecting time in this way.

Doğan Akhanlı makes that visible when he writes. He makes the consequences visible, not only for individuals, but for whole societies. As an author, he makes them visible in the form, and because he makes them visible in the form, he makes them tangible for his readers. He does not write political literature but writes politically. This is one of the greatest skills in literature, a risky one because it ignores the mentalities of the market. It is rare. Still rarer is when a writer leaves the space between the book covers and sets alongside his literary work performative, indeed, cultural policy work, trying in a second way to express his insights. In old-fashioned terms: to make a difference, to change something.

The first book I read by Doğan Akhanlı was *Judges of Last Judgement*, the third and so far the only part of the trilogy *The Seas That Disappeared* translated into German by Hülya Engin. I read the book in 2010, when Doğan Akhanlı was arrested for the third time in his life and for the first time as a German citizen at the airport in Istanbul. In his autobiographical book *Arrest in Granada*, published in 2017, he tells how it happened, what repeated itself there, how experiences of powerlessness were overlaid with experiences of solidarity, and what the consequences of this arrest were. So I won't tell you about that because I want to talk about his works. I also won't talk about it because I want you to read the book. It is a key text for the present time and also the German present, and it is an extremely wise poetical manifesto from which the cosmos of his literary work can be deduced. Start with it and then read or re-read Doğan Akhanlı's novels. Then engage with his

works when you understand how they express a real historical experience, an experienced time warp.

In *Judges of Last Judgement*, Doğan Akhanlı writes about the times of the “red rainstorm.” What a powerful image this is, the “red rainstorm,” located on the border between fantasy and legend, hence history that actually occurred, i.e. the present. It means far more than the Armenian genocide, it means its telling and repression, it means the presence of the murdered and, if you will, the reverse of the state terror of the 1980s.

When Doğan Akhanlı begins to tell a story, times devour themselves, identities change, the boundaries between fiction and experience become permeable, historical and literary figures alternate, fraternisations and contexts come to light that we didn’t want to know about. Books become accessible. Back then, I was confused when I first entered his literary space, which has also become my historical space today. I was confused because I knew next to nothing about Turkish history and certainly nothing about what it has to do with me. I was confused by the overlaps and simultaneities, confused because one intuitively feels so clearly that Doğan Akhanlı’s books are about a reality consisting of multiply interlocking, interacting mirror shards that has not yet permeated to the present, but without its recognition as a society will not let it live. It is too strong, this reality, and it affects not only Turkish society.

“Abysses cannot be told chronologically,” Doğan Akhanlı said in an interview with Birgit Morgenrath. In Doğan Akhanlı’s works, the intricacies of the violent stories – Turkish, German, Armenian, and colonial – are preceded by no diabolical pact, but by something both innocent and frightening: people – us – who (must) live with themselves and others, with their own experiences and those of others. How little it is still and again natural for us to think about this, to accept this. To think about the contexts in which our immediate neighbours and friends struggle through life. Turks, Germans, Armenians, Syrians, Black Germans, Herero, Roma, Vietnamese. What stories do they carry with them from generation to generation? Where do these stories touch and connect? Is this list arbitrary? Does it have anything to do with us sitting here? These questions become urgent when you listen to Doğan Akhanlı. Urgent, evident, but they lose any strain. They thus become self-evident, and that is not self-evident.

In *Arrest in Granada*, this book that Doğan Akhanlı wrote as a negative to his novels and plays, which is as much a minor as major work, he combines the essence of his literary work with his cultural work, which always thinks of the “inter,” through one concept: the transnational space of memory. The concept of this space could save the so-called culture of remembrance in a new era, absorbing the very convincing criticisms of younger intellectuals. Doğan Akhanlı is not one to push himself into the foreground of these debates. He creates a *fait accompli* by working with adolescents of different backgrounds, by challenging mainly privileged audiences during readings and discussions through the evidence of his speech and facilitating access to experiences and conflicts that weigh heavily without downplaying them.

“Who knows, maybe he was a breath that was always breathed into the world when memory lapses opened up,” writes Doğan Akhanlı about his time-travelling narrator, the wise Meddah Ümit Bey. Sometimes you get the impression that the more official remembrances are, the deeper we forget. Doğan Akhanlı reacts to this forgetting and to such lapses in literary form, creatively. He depicts it formally, but he also responds to it with opposing views, as if he has the quiet certainty that his Ümit Bey and his variants end up longer winded than those who go over dead bodies for memory lapses, verbally and literally.

“What was required of me was a harmless story,” writes the narrator in the novel *Madonna's Last Dream*. Highly praised in Turkey in 2005, it was first published in German ten days ago, in the translation of Recai Hallaç. An alter ego of the author speaks here, who immerses himself in the Turkish writer Sabahattin Ali, on whose novel *The Madonna in a Fur Coat* Doğan Akhanlı's *Madonna's Last Dream* improvises. The story unfolds between two historic crimes: the murder of Sabahattin Ali in 1948 and the sinking of the Jewish refugee ship Struma in 1942, in reverse chronology, because chronology is suspended by crimes like these anyway. That's what Doğan Akhanlı makes clear.

When do I begin? Where am I? And how does speech begin? These are not harmless questions. Don't be fooled by the entrancingly comedic talent, the subtleness of which would do credit to Nasreddin Hodja or Till Eulenspiegel, which Doğan Akhanlı always demonstrates in his books. Especially when it comes to terrible things. It is the laughter of absurd theatre under repressive regimes; a self-empowerment.

These are personal moments forming the core of such books; personal, not private. As an author, Doğan Akhanlı searches for the theatrical, the poetic quality in the events of the time. He has a fine sense for the weight of the words, which he proves, for example, when he leaves us in a side note the idea of how German grammar makes handling responsibility problematic, because the predicate can be postponed endlessly to the end of sentences until it's no longer associated with its subject.

Literature can change a person. It's changed Doğan Akhanlı, as he relates in a tribute to his mother who so widely opened the doors to literature to him in his childhood village that he is here today.

Today, after reading *Judges of Last Judgement*, *Anne's Silence*, *Days without Father*, *Arrest in Granada* and *Madonna's Last Dream*, when I position myself in society, my image is another than before my acquaintance with Doğan Akhanlı. A narrow space has become a wide flickering network where neurotransmitters constantly move back and forth, which works and is mobile, in which within national boundaries these very boundaries are permeable without making one homeless. One can locate oneself in it more certainly because it is more densely woven. Culture of remembrance, which is not a culture, but a necessity, a bitter path to survival, culture of remembrance can be thought differently with Doğan Akhanlı, more prudently, more sensitive to its diversity and its interactions.

How good it would be to be guided through time by Dođan Akhanlı. No harm would come to you. There would be a horizon when the seas disappear and the coffers open, waiting under the blue velvet in the works of Dođan Akhanli to return to time.

The way Goethe grasped time is no longer valid. Wanting to understand what Dođan Akhanlı tells us about time would be the beginning of a new one.

I congratulate you, Dođan, on receiving the Goethe Medal and the recognition for your efforts and your life's work.